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ABSTRACT

In 1984, a group of Asian countries began exchanging television news stories via the Pacific Ocean and Intelsat satellite networks. Similar news networks are in the planning stages among other developing nations in the Middle East and Caribbean. Such exchanges give Third World countries a way to break out of the usual dominance-dependence relationship characteristic of news flow and provide the opportunity to develop continuity and background in reporting. Although little empirical data is available, observations suggest that more emphasis is placed on human interest stories and softer news than crises, disasters, and other hard news. An analogous situation in the United States is the emergence of regional newsgathering systems and news exchanges among local stations. A study to collect empirical data concerning the effects of satellite news exchanges is currently being planned by researchers at Ohio University. (MES)

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EMERGING FROM THE PERIPHERY
SATELITTE NEWS EXCHANGES IN THE THIRD WORLD

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EMERGING FROM THE PERIPHERY
SATELLITE NEWS EXCHANGES IN THE THIRD WORLD

Two years ago, in the plenary sessions of the 1984 Prague Conference, Johan Galtung concluded his address with the assessment that little progress is being made in establishing "the new global journalism." The structure and the content of the new information and communication order, so long talked about in IAMCR, he said, remains basically the same as the old.

Would Galtung come to the same conclusion in 1986? Perhaps not. Not if he took a close look at visual news exchanges in current operation in the developing world - and those being contemplated - using satellite technologies.

In April, 1984, a group of Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia, began exchanging television news stories once each week via the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean Intelsat networks. These are countries with diverse - sometimes conflicting - cultural and political backgrounds and very different technical systems. Among them, all three television standards 625 PAL, 625 SECAM and 525 NTSC are represented.

In spite of these inhibitors, by following a principle of "free to offer, free to receive or to refuse", news editors took the initiative to share with others news they had collected for their own use. Shared items were, for the most part, those produced within country and thought to be of interest to others in the network.

These countries are now exchanging news on a daily basis, sometimes twice daily.

At about the same time, the Peoples Republic of China, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand formed a similar network. In 1986, they too are trading news on a regular basis.

Asiavision, as these emerging satellite-based networks are called, is an attempt to model the successes of Eurovision and similar visual news exchanges in the more developed world. This momentum is largely due to UNESCO sponsorship, to the organizing work of the Broadcasting Unions and the financial, logistic and moral support given by the individual countries involved.

Other such networks are in the planning stages among the Arab States, in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

The first of the visual news exchanges outside those controlled by the superpowers was begun in 1982 under the sponsorship of the Organisation Internationale de Radiofiffusion et Television. OIRT, the Eastern European consortium which includes Bulgaria, Czechoslavia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the USSR, is based in Prague.

This service, Intervision, was begun as a means for exchanging television programs using the Intersputnik network of the USSR. Since Intervision participants are also members of the Intersputnik network, news items transmitted via Intelsat from London to Moscow may be relayed via Intersputnik to Intervision countries, and back again. Cuba, Yugoslavia, Australia and Finland are participants as well.

Satellite news exchanges, such as the Asiavision exchange, have both structural and content implications for the new global journalism.

The technology, made available through Intelsat and the emerging regional satellite systems in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, will put to the test traditional assumptions about periphery-to-center relationships.

The capability for collecting and sharing ones' own news gives Third World countries a way to break out of the usual "dominance-dependence" relationships characteristic of news flow and makes possible, what has been so difficult to manage until now, horizontal exchanges between neighboring or near-neighboring states.

The difference is that, increasingly, Third World countries now control the instruments of information production and distribution which were formerly controlled by others.

Galtung also noted in 1984 how little opportunity there was to develop continuity in news reporting, how little opportunity to develop the depth and frequency of reporting so necessary to building social context and social background for public understanding of news events.

With daily exchanges among satellite partners, the opportunity for establishing continuity and for building background is readily available.

Empirical data is still scarce. Tentative observations of content in the Asiavision exchanges suggest the following. Crises, disasters and other hard-news are shared but softer news seems to dominate. The mid-ground between the overtly political and the narrowly parochial items which shows up on the evening news in the home country, appears to be the human interest story with presumed universal appeal, the very thing which in time should build in the international viewing public the basis for better cultural understanding.

Whether there will be less reporting of events that are negative in their consequences, a Galtung complaint, is not clear. It would seem so. Jerzy Oledzki, at the 1984 Prague Conference, noted "the demand for contents corresponding to the interests aspirations and values of the society." Certainly, such an aspiration can now be more readily satisfied.

It is assumed, and this will be tested in research underway, that as a result of the satellite technologies there will be more news about the Third World appearing on Third World television. News about the First and Second

Worlds should be somewhat less dominant, and, because of the reverse feeds into the international distribution channels, news about the Third World available to editors of First and Second World television news programs should be greater.

Based on two years of experience with the Asiavision exchange, news flow is clearly not one-way from center to periphery and appears to be increasingly reciprocal.

An analogous situation has developed in the United States. Due to the emergence of regional newsgathering systems more choice is now provided local stations. Slavish reliance on national networks for news is no longer necessary. The Florida News Network SNG Cooperative, a satellite news exchange involving 75 stations in Florida and neighboring states, for example, thoroughly covered the US Space Shuttle disaster in January 1986. To the dismay of the New York-based news agencies, local stations, even network affiliates, in Florida used little if any news from the national networks during the first four days of the event.

Similarly, at the time of the Bophal disaster in late 1984, Asian nations in the satellite network got their news directly from New Delhi, some of it relayed unedited to speed the information along. On the Bophal story, as in others, Asiavision fed Eurovision and Visnews. Today, Asians are getting their news about Asia from Asians and they are getting it sooner than they would from the West.

Local stations in the USA, facing an overload of news sources, are setting up a service very similar to the one invented by the members of the Asiavision exchange. RequestNet, a means by which local stations review lists of stories and potential stories and vote on what they want to receive, is now in place.

Galtung, talking about the Third World, observed how much more interested they would be, given a choice, in news about their own countries and their own regions and how much less they would be "mesmerized by the powers and superpowers."

The parallel with the local US stations and their national networks is similar. Local stations, in establishing news exchanges in networks of their own choosing, once they have SNG capabilities, move quickly to free themselves of the problems inherent in "dominance-dependence" relationships. Where it has the means to do so, it seems, the periphery will break with its dependency on the center.

"This new order must not entail liquidation of the existing international news agencies or a replacement of them with bureaucratized national agencies caring only for their own interests," cautioned Oledzki. "The emphasis must be on the expansion of the freedom to express opinions, to enhance their variety and to improve the flow of information among nations."

It is the democratization of the media, the achievement of the means for choice, that is at issue. Few, if any, of the so-called periphery nations now participating in satellite news exchanges will wish to give up their affiliations with the international agencies. What they seek is balance and choice.

A Visual News Study, to collect empirical data concerning the effects of satellite news exchanges, is now being planned by a team from Ohio University in cooperation with the Asia Pacific and Arab States Broadcasting Unions. The Study seeks to compare, in terms of news source, news subject, news type, news quality and news frequency, international news appearing on television sets among countries trading, and those not trading, visual news on a regular basis.

The Study, which uses videotaped samples drawn simultaneously in Asian and a few Middle Eastern countries, looks for evidence of international news transmitted by way of Visnews, Eurovision, Intersputnik and other international carriers. These are compared with items locally generated and locally exchanged. A comparison of items shared and items actually used is also made.

"How much more will the Asian viewer find out about his Asian brother?" and "How much more will French, British, American, Soviet and other citizens of the more developed world come to know about their planetary neighbors the Indians, the Sri Lankans, the Bruneians?" Those are the basic questions. And "What does the availability of new technologies for satellite news gathering and distribution have to say about democratization of the media?"

It is true, even if the countries of the periphery gain greater control over information technologies formerly dominated by those in the center, they will hardly be able to compete story-for-story with the established international networks. What is possible is that they will have the means for entering into an exchange with the rest of the world on a more equal basis. And that is a step in the right direction.

Reference: International Association for Mass Communication Research, SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND GLOBAL PROBLEMS: MAIN PAPERS FOR THE PLENARY SESSIONS OF THE 1984 PRAGUE CONFERENCE, Published with the support of the Czechoslovak National Commission of UNESCO, Professor James D. Halloran, Director, Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, England.